All About Blue Cheese

BY PATRICIA CONNELL

BLUE-VEINED CHEESES are often called the noblest of all, but there will never be agreement on just which one is King of the Blues (or *bleus*, in the Gallic versions). English Stilton, Italian Gorgonzola, American Maytag, Oregon blue—and perhaps most famous, France's Roquefort—each has its ardent advocates.

Nowadays every important cheese-producing country makes at least one blue. France has dozens, most of them destined for local consumption. These varieties are remarkable in their distinctiveness; they vary from salty, pungent and crumbly to mild, mellow and spreadable. If you have never sampled several blue cheeses side by side, by all means do: You will be intrigued by the pronounced differences.

It may come as a surprise to you that by far our largest European supplier of blue cheeses is Denmark. In 1983, for example, we imported more than 4 million pounds of Danish blues, compared with 1.2 million from England, 1.1 million from France, 750,000 from West Germany and 190,000 pounds from Italy. Owing to Department of Agriculture import quotas, however, these figures seem small next to our production of blue cheeses—a whopping 31 million pounds per year.

Birth of the Blues

All blue-veined cheeses are made in essentially the same way. The first step is to coagulate the warmed milk with rennet, a process that takes no more than an hour or two. The curd is then cut into small cubes, drained of whey and sprinkled with a tiny amount of penicillium mold culture; one gram of the pure culture for 2,000 quarts of milk is enough to do the trick. The curd cubes are pressed into a mold or hoop and left to drain for several days.

When the now-firm wheel of drained curd is removed from its hoop, it is rubbed with salt at least once, an important step that enhances flavor, helps draw out moisture and discourages the growth of unwanted bacteria. The wheel is also pierced through with dozens of needles to allow air to penetrate, because the cheese must be exposed to oxygen for the blue veining to spread. The cheeses are arranged on racks in a cave, in the case of Roquefort, or in a controlled-climate ripening room for a preliminary curing period of, typically, three to four weeks. During this time, the mold spreads throughout the wheels.

Finally the cheeses are transferred to an aging chamber, again, in some cases, a natural cave. Here they ripen for as long as it takes to acquire the right firm-to-buttery texture and mellow piquancy, usually between three and six months. When samples indicate that the batch is sufficiently aged, the cheese will be either sent on its way to market or held at just above freezing until time for shipment.

The basic cheesemaking process, then, is more or less consistent from one producer to the next. But variables affect the cheese every step of the way: The milk, the point at which the penicillium mold is added, the curing-room environment, and the exact ripening time vary from one blue cheese to another, and these distinctions are responsible for the wide range of flavors and textures among different types.

ILLUSTRATION BY MICHELLE BURCHARD

BLUE CHEESE
continued from page 156

Roquefort

Interestingly, this luscious cheese—perhaps the most renowned of all the blues—traces its origins to a prehistoric geological cataclysm. Mount Combalou, a rocky 3,000-foot peak in the Rouergue region of southern France, collapsed upon itself to form a subterranean labyrinth of caves and fissures 11 stories deep and covering 25 acres. Thanks to constant seepage and evaporation of water, these earth-sheltered chambers maintain the same cold, damp atmosphere year round, a steady 45°F and 95 percent humidity.

Such conditions are perfect for the growth of the essential blue mold, *Penicillium roqueforti*. Ages ago, it was no doubt an accidental discovery that a cheese left in one of the Combalou caves would naturally become veined with blue green mold and acquire a delicious flavor, while nothing of the sort happened in other caves nearby.

Imported by Roman connoisseurs as early as the first century A.D. (making it the oldest of the blues), Roquefort's quality has always been maintained. In fact, since 1407 the name Roquefort has been legally restricted to the genuine article—cheeses ripened in the Mount Combalou caves. Today the cheeses are seeded with spores of Penicillium roqueforti, but the cave ripening still results in a unique product. The name is protected by international trade agreements, and all the cheese is handled by only nine producers belonging to the *Fédération des Syndicats des Industriels de Roquefort*. The village of Roquefort-sur-Soulzon, perched on the side of the mountain, depends on the cheese for its livelihood and has become something of a shrine for fanciers of its product.

Roquefort is the only widely known blue cheese made exclusively from sheep's milk, most of it coming from ewes grazing on the rocky plateau surrounding Mount Combalou, though a small proportion comes from other areas as far away as Corsica. Dairies scattered throughout the region process the cheeses through the draining and salting steps; then the wheels are shipped to the Combalou caves to ripen. Only then may the cheese bear the Roquefort trademark, an emblem depicting a red sheep in an oval.

In a good year, each ewe gives about 27 gallons of milk, which makes 56 pounds of cheese. A cow produces up to 30 times more milk—partially explaining Roquefort's high price compared with that of other blues, which are made from cow's milk. Sheep's milk is, however, exceptionally rich and flavorful, and it imparts a unique piquancy to the cheese.

Roquefort should be creamy-firm, not crumbly. Although intense, it should not be too salty; the unfortunate fact is that much of the product destined for export is oversalted to enhance its keeping qualities.

For Roquefort fans who just cannot get enough of their favorite, or who have difficulty finding it in prime condition, a trip to France is in order. More than 90 percent of all the Roquefort produced is consumed there, and each year we import only about as much as is eaten in Paris alone!

Stilton

Needless to say, no self-respecting Englishman would agree with the

French assertion that Roquefort is preeminent. The undisputed English contender is Stilton, acclaimed for excellence since the eighteenth century.

Stilton has never been manufactured in the English town for which it is named. It was, however, first served there—probably in the mid-1700s—at an inn called The Bell. The cheese is said to have been invented by a housekeeper in Leicestershire, a Mrs. Paulet, whose sister and brother-in-law were The Bell's proprietors. One Christmas, Mrs. Paulet presented them with her special homemade cheese; soon it became a big hit with travelers lodged at the inn, and they spread its fame around the country. In those days, home cheesemaking was a common pursuit, but just why Mrs. Paulet's cellar harbored the right penicillium molds to produce Stilton will doubtless remain an unanswered question.

By 1969, so many disparate and inferior "Stiltons" were being sold that a High Court judgment was invoked to protect the cheese's reputation. Among other things, the judgment stipulates that the milk must come from one of the three neighboring counties of Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire. Only seven dairies produce the cheese, and it is still made largely by hand. Before ripening, the wheels of Stilton spend about a week in a "coating room" where, wrapped in cloth, they start to develop their characteristic natural brown rind. While there, they are turned every day for even draining.

The cheese is typically aged for four to six months—not in caves, but in somewhat less romantic dairy ripening rooms. When fully ripe, Stilton should have a wrinkled, but not cracked, rind and a pale cream to yellow interior. The veining should be greenish blue and distributed more or less evenly, though it tends to concentrate toward the center of the wheel. Unfortunately, Stilton is often sold underripe, in which case it is hard, white rather than cream-colored, chalky and slightly acid-tasting. Be sure to sample before buying. At its best, it is firm, flaky and buttery; the flavor, with undertones of cheddar, is complex.

Like nearly all English cheese, Stilton is made from cow's milk and has a somewhat crumbly texture. Once cut, it tends to dry out quickly. To store any leftover portions, drape the whole thing with a cloth moistened with salt water, wrap it loosely and store it in a cool place; do not refrigerate the cheese, as this tends to hasten drying.

Gorgonzola

Roquefort may be le *roi des fromages* in France, and Stilton the King of Cheeses in England, but Gorgonzola is Italy's uncontested *il re dei formaggi*.

Gorgonzola originated in the northern Italian town of the same name, now a suburb of Milan, but its production has spread to other parts of Lombardy as well. From Roman times on, dairy herds traditionally spent the winter in pastures south of Milan and were driven north to the mountains for the summer. To break the journey, dairymen stopped at Gorgonzola to milk the cows; faced with a surfeit of milk, the villagers made cheese and took it to nearby limestone caves to age. In the caves, the cheese was naturally infused with penicillium and—like Roquefort—the rest is history.

Though some Gorgonzola is still aged in caves, most is made and ripened in modern dairies. It is seeded with a different strain of mold—*Penicillium glaucum*, not the Penicillium roqueforti used in most other blue cheeses—and consequently the veining has a more green than blue cast. Average aging time of the genuine Italian version is two to three months, but this can vary considerably depending on the desired result: Young *dolcelatte* or "sweet milk" Gorgonzola is mild and lightly veined; older cheese is salty, strong and somewhat crumbly.

The typical imported Gorgonzola is much softer, creamier and less assertive than most other blues. Oddly enough, just the opposite is true of its American-made counterpart. In this country, most blues are aged for about 60 days, but the federal standard for Gorgonzola requires that it be aged for at least 90, resulting in a sharper, drier cheese. Several domestic companies, among them Blue Moon and Tolibia, make both regular blue and Gorgonzola; it is instructive to taste a single dairy's two products side by side.

All-American

While they may not boast the historical cachet of their European cousins, some superb American blue cheeses are making names for themselves. Perhaps the best known is Maytag Blue, produced in Newton, Iowa. Established by the son of the founder of the Maytag appliance company, Maytag Dairy Farms had by 1940 assembled a prizewinning herd of Holstein-Friesians. While searching for a way to use the high-quality milk, the Maytag family learned that Iowa State University had just patented a process for making blue cheese. An agreement was struck: Maytag would build the dairy, and the university would train the cheesemakers. The first wheels of Maytag Blue rolled out in 1941; today the output is 1,500 pounds per day, most of it sold by mail order. Aged for six months—very long for a domestic blue—Maytag is chalk white with blue veins, firm and tangy.

Oregon and Minnesota blues, also outstanding, undergo a shorter aging period and are consequently milder and softer than Maytag. The Oregon version, which is creamy beige and has a lovely melting texture, is chiefly available on the West Coast. Minnesota blue, sold under the Treasure Cave label, ripens in sandstone caverns in the town of Faribault. Though the caves had housed a brewery from the 1850s until Prohibition, in 1935 an enterprising cheesemaker saw a potential American equivalent to Roquefort's underground chambers.

New Types

Roquefort, Stilton, Gorgonzola and the American versions represent only a tiny sampling of the blue cheeses the world has to offer. Scores of others are produced everywhere from Ireland to Israel, with the Danish blues, several German brands and French regional specialties such as *bleu de Bresse* and *bleu d'Auvergne* also prominent.

But an altogether new group of blue cheeses, developed only in the last few years, is particularly tantalizing. They are given two different types of penicillium; one, the same as that used for the classic blues, results in the interior blue veining, while the other, *Penicillium candidum* or *Penicillium camemberti*, is sprayed on the outside of the cheese to create a white rind and to make the cheese ripen to a soft, creamy consistency. These cheeses look and taste like a hybrid of blue cheese and such soft-ripened types as Brie and Camembert. They have a gentle blue flavor and are opulently rich and smooth. Look for Wisconsin's Camembleu, Denmark's Blue Castello and Saga Blue, and West Germany's Bavarian Blue and Cambozola.

Storing and Serving

To keep a properly aged blue cheese from overripening or drying out, wrap it well and store it in the vegetable crisper, where the air is moister than in colder parts of the refrigerator. Any surface mold that may develop on the cheese is harmless; simply scrape it off.

Whether or not to freeze is a subject that provokes great controversy among dairymen and connoisseurs. Some say never to freeze blue cheese; others find freezing perfectly acceptable as long as the cheese is well wrapped, both for freezing *and throughout the thawing time*. Maytag Dairy Farms advises leaving as much of the foil wrapping on the cheese as possible, then sealing it in a plastic freezer bag. It can remain frozen for months; thaw it slowly in the refrigerator.

The basic rule for serving is to have the cheese at room temperature; the nuances of any aged variety, blue or not, will be masked if it is chilled. If the cheese seems to be underripe when purchased, letting it stand unrefrigerated for a day or two will usually bring about improvement.

And what are the best companions for blue cheese? Roquefort and Sauternes, Stilton and Port, Gorgonzola and Barolo—these traditional pairings have stood the test of time magnificently. Assertive blues can stand up to any number of robust red or sweet late-harvest white wines. The mild new soft-ripened types, on the other hand, are best partnered with a Beaujolais or other lighter-bodied wine that will not overpower them.

Blue cheeses are also superb with fruit, either for dessert or as a separate course (*bere ripiene*, ripe pears hollowed and stuffed with Gorgonzola, is a Milanese classic). If you are serving a particularly strong-flavored blue, you might adopt the French custom of accompanying it with unsalted butter and crusty bread to tone down the pungency. Whatever you team with the cheese, make it the highest possible quality: The blueblood of cheeses really does deserve the best.□

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Bon Appétit
12/1986

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By Nao Hauser—Splendid French-inspired recipes and an elegant ambience combine for a special evening with friends.

THE COGNAC MYSTIQUE 150
By Anthony Dias Blue—The making of the world's greatest brandy.

ALL ABOUT BLUE CHEESE 154
By Patricia Connell—An international favorite rediscovered.

ON AND OFF THE AVENUE

CHRISTMAS GIFTS FOR MEN

THE Cathedral of St. John the Divine, at 112th Street and Amsterdam Avenue, rises from the highest point on Manhattan Island. It is the largest Gothic cathedral in the world (the Statue of Liberty could stand upright in the central crossing), and it is unfinished. Like a complex physics equation strung across a classroom blackboard, scaffolding covers the exterior of the south tower and fills the interior of the north and south transepts; the elements of the equation might be termed perseverance, resources, artisanship, and faith. This is the centennial year of the decision to build a cathedral in the United States on the scale of the great churches of Europe (the scale of St. John the Divine outstrips those of Chartres and Westminster Abbey, and is bested only by that of St. Peter's in Rome). The cornerstone, though, was not laid until six years later, two days after Christmas—St. John's Day, 1892. Today, stone by stone, the building of the cathedral continues, and its North Field doubles as a stoneyard and a soccer field. All the stone is Indiana limestone, cut into blocks on the grounds of the cathedral by a giant red-blue-and-yellow machine (during the cutting process water is sprayed onto the stone and the saw blade to wash away the dust and cool the blade). Moldings are cut on the blocks by a crew of stonecutters, and then the stones are hauled across the field to the carving shed, where they are carved with images of angels and saints, beasts and birds, twining flowers and leaves, by local apprentices drawn from the cathedral's volatile, complicated neighborhood. The work is done under the guidance and direction of Master Carver Nicholas Fairplay, who at the age of sixteen apprenticed himself to the English guild of stone carvers, which is responsible for restoring the carvings that throughout England adorn the walls of cathedrals such as Canterbury and St. Paul's. He spent three years at Westminster Abbey. "I grew up in Chichester, in the south of England," Fairplay told us. "It's a medieval town—you have your market in the square—and you grow up with an amazing sense of what it's supposed to look like and feel like. Here you grow up with skyscrapers and Walt Disney. I am training six people now in how to carve—most have been here two years. It's really teaching them how to see. We begin with studying carving of the late thirteenth century; the higher the towers get, the later the period gets, but the point is not to do an exact copy but to develop a style through understanding."

Every stone is numbered, and it is possible to participate tangibly in the completion of the cathedral with a subscription of as little as $100 for a plainly dressed stone, called an ashlar. The name designated by the giver will be entered in the seventy-five-year-old Book of Remembrance (which lists, among others, the name of King George VI), and the recipient will receive a parchment certificate from the Bishop of New York, the Trustees, and the Dean of the Cathedral, commemorating the gift. (Other types of building stones include arch pier stones, with colonette jambs and rounded moldings, for a gift of $1,000 each, and cornerstones, or quoins, hand-finished on two or more faces, for a gift of $500.) A particularly pleasing feature of such a gift (in addition to its everlastingness, and the certainty that it won't be relegated to an attic) is that the amount of money paid out by the subscriber is not mentioned on the certificate, although the type of stone and its number are. The donor of a gargoyle, and/or the honoree, may be photographed—smiling or grimacing—with the gargoyle and the young man or woman responsible for carving it; the building stones may be ordered by calling the cathedral's development office, at 316-7488.